

British Artillery Records

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Background

While artillery has been part of the British military since 1346, it wasn't until 26 May 1716 that King George authorized established of a permanent body of artillery. Originally two companies of field artillery were raised at Woolwich, Kent. Each company was comprised of 100 men. Woolwich continued as the home of the Royal Artillery as it grew over time.

Until 1855, the Royal Artillery was administered by the Board of Ordnance and kept records separate from the regular army, which was part of the War Office. Key dates in the history of the Royal Artillery include:

- 1722 - two additional artillery companies formed at Gibraltar and Minorca, raising total to four.
- 1741 – Royal Military Academy at Woolwich Royal Arsenal formed to train Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers. Cadet company formed.
- 1748 – EIC forms artillery companies for all three presidencies (combined with Royal Artillery in 1862, records before 1862 as part of EIC records)
- 1756 – Royal Irish regiment of Artillery formed (combined with Royal Artillery in 1801)
- 1757 – twenty-four companies, now divided into two battalions.
- 1771 – thirty-two companies in four battalions, with two additional *invalid companies* made up of unfit men restricted to garrison service.
- 1793 – four troops of Royal Horse Artillery formed to support the Cavalry.
- 1801 – Royal Irish Artillery merged into the Royal Artillery
- 1855 – Board of Ordnance abolished, all personnel transferred to the War Office. All records of RA personnel classified under class WO.
- 1862 – The separate EIC presential artillery batteries (21 Horse and 48 field batteries) Were combined into the Royal Artillery.
- 1899 – Royal Artillery reorganized to three groups – the Royal Horse Artillery (R.H.A.) Royal Field Artillery or just Royal Artillery (R.F.A. or R.A.) and the Royal Garrison Artillery (R.G.A.)

Royal Artillery Records

There are many Royal Artillery records, but they are often scattered among other army records in non-consecutive bundles. The types of records are:

- Records of service – contain name, age, description, birthplace, trade before attestation, dates of service, details of promotions, date of marriage, date of discharge or death, and include attestation papers.
- Description books – give physical description, distinguishing marks, age, birthplace, trade, and religion.
- Baptisms, marriages & deaths of servicemen and their families
- Discharge Books - contain date discharged or died, pension awarded, age
- Royal Chelsea hospital pensioner records – contain name, age, description, birthplace, particulars of service, and reason for discharge (Note: WO 116/1-165 digitized, covers 3 Oct 1715-1 Jan 1894)
- Pension records – payment details, reason for pension, contain some vital records
- Employment registers – contain name, age, residence, occupation, marital status, number of children, particulars of work done for RA, amount paid.
- Registers of deceased soldiers
- Commission books for officers
- Lists of Officers (1727-1751, 1793, 1851, and 1855)
- List of half pay officers, 1722
- Lists of NCO's, gunners, and retired servicemen
- Muster books (contain where located on specific date) – weekly or monthly
- Quarter books – give salaries, wages, pensions, allowances paid to civilian and military personnel, 1594-1837, see WO 54/1-196)
- Appointment papers contain original applications, testimonials, and related info
- Cadet documents – applications, notifications, nominations, supporting cadet's certificates of age, baptism, withdrawal
- Correspondence (in-letters and out-letters)
- Minutes contains justification and notification of salaries and wages, pensions, and allowances, 1644-1856
- Accounts, bills, and vouchers
- Various other miscellaneous records

Availability of Records

The National Archives (TNA). Nearly all Royal Artillery records are held at the National Archives in Kew, Surrey. They are part of the record series WO. The three major record classes which contain family history information for the Royal Artillery are WO 54, WO 69, , and WO

116, with some lesser or fewer records in WO 10 and WO 25. There are many other record classes, such as WO 44 through WO 55. Until recently, none of the records were online, but TNA has started an aggressive project called the Digital Microfilm project.

The digital microfilm project digitizes records for an entire bundle and saves it as a PDF file. Individuals can download the PDF file for any bundle which has been digitized and then read it on their computer. The files tend to be large – 30 to 100 megabytes. They are not indexed or searchable. They are like microfilm, except you can scroll through the PDF much faster than through a film and the image quality is surprisingly good. A list of the record classes which have been at least partially digitized is online at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/digital-microfilm.htm.

A challenge to researchers is there is no good way currently to know exactly which records are available to download online. The link just above gives a list of record classes for which at least some records have been digitized, but doesn't tell you which bundles. You can browse their Discovery catalogue bundle by bundle and click on the details bundle. If it is available online, there will be a view tab. If not, there isn't a view tab. Another method to find digitized records is to go to TNA Discovery search (<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/SearchUI/>), click on advanced search, and list the class number you want in the input box marked *reference*. You can restrict the results by including a keyword such as *artillery* if the desired record class contains other records in which you are not interested. For example, there are thousands of bundles in WO 25, but less than 10% relate to the Royal Artillery. So, I search for the word *artillery* and the reference *WO 25* and the results tell me only 3 bundles in WO 25 for Royal Artillery have been digitized—all returns of Officers' services for the Royal Malta Artillery 1870-1872.

Family History Library (and Centres) have less than 10% of Royal Artillery records available on microfilm. The FHL Military Records register can help you find which records are available. Nearly all the available records are in record classes WO 69. For example, the FHL has RA records of service 1791-1860 (except battalion 1 goes later), arranged by battalion. These are WO 69/81-175 and 626-641. Unfortunately, there is an index to these records in WO 69/801-839, but these bundles are not available anywhere except in person at TNA. WO 69/176-7 contains records of service of Artillery Invalids, 1832-1859, arranged by certificate number. These have no index, but are available on film. Dozens of other records which are in WO 69 are available at the FHL on film.

Online databases maintained by others contain many British military records. As of November 2012, I've identified four databases which contain Royal Artillery records, and they are quite small. These are *Royal Artillery Military Medals, 1916-1993* and *Royal Artillery*

Honours & Awards, 1939-1946 both available at FindMyPast, and *List of Artillery Officers 1862-1914* and *Army Lists* (selected years) available at TheGenealogist. An attempt to list all military databases available online was started in the FamilySearch Research Wiki, but only these four Royal Artillery databases are included. See www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/British_Military_Records_Online.

Reference Sources

- Laws, M.E.S. *Battery Records of the Royal Artillery, 1716-1859*. Woolwich: Royal Artillery Institute, 1952. FHL book 942 M2La. This book starts off with a detailed explanation of the Royal Artillery and records at TNA. Each RA company is assigned a unique serial number to use throughout the book. This avoids complications as company names, numbers, and even battalion assigned to changed over time. The bulk of the book is organized by year and gives monthly location for each company, details of their moves and detachments, and lists deaths of officers. It also contains a gazetteer.
- Kane, John and Col. F. C. Morgan, ed. *List of Officers of the Royal Regiment of Artillery*, Vol 1 1763 - June 1862. Vol. 2 June 1862 – June 1914. Sheffield:W. C. Leng & Co., 1914. (FHL 942 M2lor). Vol 2 may be the source for TheGenealogist online database listed above.
- Cook, Frank and Andrea. *Casualty Roll for the Crimea, 1854-1855*. London: J.B.Hayward & sons, 1976 (FHL 942 M2cc) pp. 1-2, 22-3, 43-4, 68-9, 85, 103, 127-32, 215 (see also Sappers & Miners).
- Staff of The National Archives. *Army Musters 1730-1898*, Online guide. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/army-muster-1730-1898.htm
- Staff of The National Archives. *Board of Ordnance*. Online guide. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/board-of-ordnance.htm.